The Fourth Church Pulpit

APOCALYPSE NOW?

November 15, 1992

John M. Buchanan

FOURTH
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TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut St. Chicago, IL 60611 2094
312-787-4570 John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Scripture: Malachi 4:1-6, Luke 21:5-19

"...the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another..." -Luke 21:6 (NRSV)

The first time I heard that Jesus was coming again to take all his faithful people to be with him, leaving the world to proceed to some kind of terrible end, I confess it did not sound like good news to me.

That personal memory was precipitated by reading Lewis Smedes who said that when he heard in Sunday School about the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the world, his first thought was a wish that Jesus would wait at least until the Detroit Tigers won a World Series. I reflected briefly on Smedes' paradigm and its relevance for Cubs fans.

- I have since learned that what you think about this topic, the end of the world, has more than a little to do with whether or not you are enjoying *this world.*
- If you are — the end does not sound like Good News at all.
- If you are not — the end of this and the beginning of something new might sound attractive.

This is a sermon about Christian eschatology. Eschatology has to do with the end, the end of time, the end of the world. Eschatology is about summing up, conclusions, the purpose of the whole enterprise. There is a lot of eschatology in the Bible. Some think that knowing about the eschatology is the key to understanding the Bible. And when you think about it for a minute, how you believe things are going to turn out has a great deal to do with how you live your life.

In any event, eschatology is the first word theological students learn when they go away to seminary.

The second word students learn, and another good one, is apocalypse.

Apocalypse means — revelation; literally, an unveiling of the truth. Sometimes by means of a heavenly messenger, sometimes a dream or vision. The last book in the Bible, the Book of Revelation, is known as the Apocalypse of John.

Now when apocalyptic writing has to do with the end of things, when what the revelation reveals is the end, what you have is apocalyptic eschatology — a wonderful phrase, the confident pronounciation of which is almost worth the price of three or four years of seminary tuition. But you rarely get to pronounce it because it is a topic we studiously avoid. Says Walter Brueggemann, one of our best thinkers these days,"...all this talk about the end — time is intellectually difficult and pastorally problematic... end-time talk, which permeates the New Testament is deeply incongruous with our intellectual world... besides," he says, "none of us wants to sound like a religious crazy." [*Christian Century,* 10/21/92]

That's who seems to talk about the end. The comic strip character in the *New Yorker,* carrying a sign: "Repent!" In fact there has been a flurry of apocalyptic activity fairly recently, with a decidedly eschatological twist. People who pay attention to these things and use the Bible to calculate the precise time, announced that the end was coming on October 28. I was in a meeting in New York on that day; when the notice for the meeting came in the mail, one of the brochures included, which had flooded Manhattan, announced that October 28 was *it* and described in lurid detail what to expect. Airplanes would fall because their pilots, if they were believers, would be bodily taken up into heaven; cars on the freeways would be out of control because believing drivers would be taken away; people would be seen floating out of windows of office buildings. The secretary had added a P.S. explaining that she enclosed the announcement in case we had any last minute

preparing to do. People all over the world took it very seriously. In Korea 20,000 gathered in churches to sing hymns, pray and wait, many having sold all their belongings. The Korean government was making plans to help with the anticipated depression and despair in case it didn't happen.

The most popular religious book in the world, I am told, continues to be Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth,* which superimposes Biblical symbols and metaphors on our situation and concludes that we are living in the last days, a conclusion that has been reached by people focusing on particularly Biblical descriptions in every age for 2,000 years including my grandmother who was convinced and could argue persuasively that the early 1950s were the end.

But perhaps the most prominent apocalyptist plying the market today is Pat Robertson. Northwestern University Professor Gary Wills wrote an editorial pointing out that Robertson had published a book earlier this year, *The New World Order,* arguing that President Bush's Gulf War, his proudest achievement, was part of a diabolic plot to destroy America. By submitting to the U.N. and calling the world to its banner, President Bush, argues Robertson, "was proclaiming the New World Order of the Anti- Christ." Wondering why Robertson was speaking to a convention whose purpose was to nominate Mr. Bush, Wills concluded bluntly, "The crazies are in charge. The fringe has taken over." [*New York Times* 8/16/92]

In a scholarly article on the phenomenon Drew University Professor Catherine Keller observes, "The proliferating smorgasbord of end-of-the world scenarios...that apparently millions of Americans believe that Jesus is returning soon and that they will be 'raptured up' to be with him before the final tribulation begins. 'In case of the rapture, this car will be driverless,' the bumper sticker announces. More frightening, Professor Keller suggests, "for the first time in history, literist apocalyptics have access to the power of the state and the technological capacity for a self-fulfilling prophecy." [*Theology Today:* "Why Apocalypse, Now?" July 1992] The paper last week reported that Robertson's Christian Coalition has 350,000 members, intends to double its size and has considerable influence in one-third of precincts of the Republican Party.

Well, what do we believe? There is a Biblical apocalyptic. It is eschatological. There are four scenarios.

1. The *Day of the Lord* — in Malachi "the great and terrible day" when the existing order of things is shattered and a new order begins.

2. The *Fall of Jerusalem* — long predicted by the prophets, which is a sign that the end is here.

3. The *Second Coming of Christ.*

4. The *Tribulation* — wars, pestilence and the persecution of the faithful. [See *Homiletic,* Fall 1992]

Major historical crises stimulate apocalyptic thinking — military occupation, persecution, conflict and turmoil. The end of the millennium has precipitated a flurry of apocalyptic activity as it did in the last decade of the 10th century as well.

The Bible says more than one thing on this topic and sometimes it seems as if there is an internal argument going on between people who think the end is imminent and those who are getting ready to settle in for the long haul. But beneath the particulars there is a consistent and unique idea. According to Hebrew and Christian theology, human history has a goal, a purpose. Non-Biblical religions and philosophies characterize human history as an endlessly repeated cycle, symbolized by a circle or wheel. The writer of Ecclesiastes was quoting that culture when he wrote, ..."a vanity of vanities...there is nothing new under the sun."

History in the Bible, on the other hand, has a beginning and an ending. Its symbol is a straight line, a road, a journey. It has a purpose and the one who created it, participates in it, and brings it to its final purpose. In the history of human ideas this one is basic and very important. History is a journey, toward a goal, not an endless repetitious cycle. God, we believe, knows the end of the story. God, we believe, will be there.

In the New Testament lesson this morning Jesus has said some very specific things about the end. He has said that the Temple will be destroyed — an almost unthinkable idea for his contemporaries, an event they were sure would usher in the end of the world. The Temple was the foundation of everything, the very symbol of God's presence and Israel's special relationship, their chosenness. It was also sensational architecture apparently: shining white stone, laminated in front with plates of gold. The Temple shone, glittered in the sun and captured the heart, the pride, the piety and the aspirations of a people. Under occupation, the Temple was, for them, a symbol of indestructible hope. That it should be destroyed was unthinkable.

Now it is always helpful, as I think about passages like this one, to recall that forty years after Jesus made this little speech it happened. The Romans, tired of the constant rebellion of their Hebrew subjects, laid siege to Jerusalem, starved out the population, then invaded, destroyed it and with great intentionality, leveled the Temple and dispersed the Jews.

Luke, who is writing the account, is writing 25 or 30 years after that event. The Temple is gone. It is the time of the underground church. I am helped to recall that some of the men and women who heard Jesus make this speech became martyrs, kept the faith and died for it. That is to say, when this apocalypse was written down, the worst things that people could imagine had already happened. The Temple was gone. Their dear ones, their saints, martyred. And they, the sad remnants, were under vicious attack by Rome. Outlawed, hunted down, imprisoned, tortured, executed, the unthinkable had happened and was still happening. And their only hope, the only sensible suggestion, was to retreat, withdraw, hide and wait for the end to come.

This literature — this apocalyptic — I would suggest, is not to predict the end-of-time. It is to hold them up, to give them courage, to lift their spirits, to make them brave and strong enough to live in their perilous times.

It was to correct a theological notion that must have seemed sensible to them; namely that God must hate the world, that the world was a dangerous, sinful, awful place and so the life of faith was to be lived in a full retreat and withdrawal from the world, waiting for the end to come.

What New Testament eschatology really says is that there is a better day coming, a new order. God loves the world.

Theologian and author Lewis Smedes writes, "There is a lot of silly talk in some Christian circles these days about the end of the world, as if Christians are supposed to look forward to a huge holocaust in which God destroys his own creation. What absolute rubbish! God loves our world - God has no plan to preside over its demise. God's plan is to make it right again." [*How Can It be All Right When Everything is All Wrong,* p. 167]

Smedes recalls lecturing a group one time on the topic of Christian Eschatology and asking if they wanted to go to heaven when they died. All raised their hands. Then he asked if they would like to go today, if given the chance. One couple raised their hands — very slowly. Most people, he said, want to put off heaven for a while — a rain check, if you please.

We live in treacherous times. Walter Brueggemann writes that "for all our intellectual sophistication, seemingly assumed affluence and confidence in our technology, a deep unsettled feeling that things are indeed falling apart cuts across the social and ideological spectrum: we wonder how much time we have left before the earth is too hot or the oil is gone."

Douglas John Hall:

> "It would not be an exaggeration to say that all creative and responsible social thought today is a search for answers precisely to the question, 'How can we be truthful and at the same time hopeful?'" [*Thinking the Faith*, p. 177]

Lewis Thomas warns that we are a "fragile species" in his new book of that title. We are threatened, he writes, not only by what we are doing to the environment, but even more by our attitude - our patent refusal to face up to and deal with the problems we have created. "At no time since the early days of the 17th century have human thoughts been so darkened by an expectation of doom." [*The Fragile Species*, p. 190]

I do believe there's something to the argument. Like the terrified church in the first century, surrounded by powerful enemies, weak, wondering whether or not it would survive...so people who love this nation, this culture, this city, wring their hands in despair at the multitude of problems which beset us, and withdraw. Another child is dead — this time of a self-inflicted wound from the hand gun he brought to school and we find ourselves wondering if indeed, there is a way out of this wilderness, wondering if it really doesn't make more sense to simply shut it out — the guns, drugs, gangs, the crumbling projects and overcrowded underfunded schools. We find ourselves thinking the unthinkable — as unthinkable as the destruction of the Temple was for Jesus' contemporaries — that perhaps we are seeing the end — that two centuries of American history and culture have come to this.

And finally that all that is left for us is to withdraw, to go into hiding, to create safe enclaves which will insulate us for a few years from what is happening. That posture is a symptom of a spiritual sickness.

And when we think like that we need nothing so much as the assurance of our faith, that history has purpose, that there is a new order coming, that there is a God whose ultimate plans and purposes will not be thwarted and who calls, not to wait in hiding, but to get busy.

The critical issue in the first century was for God's people to be hopeful and brave and not to retreat from the frightening world they faced; to know that no matter what happened to them, no matter how grim things looked, there was a new and better world coming, when all people will live in peace; when righteousness and justice will be established throughout the land; that even if they did not personally survive to see it, as they did not, nevertheless there will come a great and terrible day of the Lord, when all the promises of the past will be kept and all the wounds bound up and all the tears dried and there will be laughter and joy.

The critical issue for God's people is that we have dared to believe that it will happen in history, and that therefore our holiest and highest spiritual calling is not to retreat to a safe place, singing our hymns and praying our prayers, waiting for Jesus to come again, but to hit the streets, to confront the principalities and powers, to tell the truth and to articulate the hope and explain the vision, and then roll up our sleeves and go to work.

We believe history has a goal, a purpose. We believe in history's creator and redeemer, and it is precisely because of our deeply eschatological apocalyptic, that we will not turn inward or away from our own history, our own world.

Karl Barth said:

> "Hope takes place in the act of taking the next steps."

Juergen Moltmann —

> "We must hope but not wait for justice." [op. cit., C. Keller, *Theology Today*.]

And beneath it all is our faith, our deepest trust in the providence and love and power of the God we know in Jesus Christ. Because of that, the eschatological question for us is not when the end will come, or where or how, but who will be there.

None of us is very good at saying what we believe about these things. William Willimon tries to put it in as simple terms as possible:

> "When the game is finally played out good will win: when the last act of the play is done, the play will have meaning, and its author will be revealed: when the journey is over we will find out that it has been worth the effort and we will know who has led the way: when present and past and future is now, God will be there holding us in the palm of his hand. We will find that in the end our goal is communion rather than oblivion. In other words, our end is our beginning with God." [*On a Wild and Windy Mountain,* p. 139]

For the people who heard the prophet Malachi speak of "the great and terrible day of the Lord" centuries before Christ, the end was near. For the people who heard Jesus predict the destruction of the temple two thousand years ago, the end was near.

Part of the story would go on without them. And part of their story would go on, would not end even though it looked for all the world like the end of everything.

Did you notice how gently both of the readings conclude? Not with a warning, nor harsh judgment nor predictions of a holocaust, but with something like a promise. The very last words in the Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament —

> "He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse."

And Jesus to his terrified followers:

> "Not a hair of your head will perish."

And then at the very end of the book, the conclusion of the apocalypse of John, a promise which is for us as we struggle with the challenges of living faithfully in these times, and also as we struggle with our own souls, our fears, our hopes, our faith...

> "I saw a new heaven and a new earth... and I heard a voice... 'The home of God is among mortals'... God will dwell with them and be their God... God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

The end is always near, but in the end, as in the beginning, promise, hope, love. Thanks be to God.